

Service delivery and rural older people

Ros Foskey, a Senior Project Officer at The Rural Development Centre has a special interest in ageing in rural areas. In 1998 she presented two papers on ageing and small rural communities. These papers were well received at the NSW Rural Conference of the Australian Association of Gerontology (May 1998) and at the Institute of Family Studies Conference (November 1998).

In Australia rural areas are experiencing economic and demographic change, and as a result many small communities can be said to have an 'ageing population'.

Service Delivery Assumptions

Small rural communities are being affected by the cumulative impacts of decisions, each made in isolation by different government departments and private business, but the combination of which result in often unforeseen and unintended consequences on the quality of life of older people from small rural communities.

Assumption 1: Efficient and effective use of resources can be achieved by the regionalisation of services: People to services rather than services to people.

With the increasing regionalisation of both government and private services, older people from small communities are forced to travel away from their local area in order to access even basic services. The regionalisation of services also transfers many of the costs of access from the service provider to the service consumer. These costs are often borne not only by the individual, but by the extended family network, and increasingly by local community based aged care service providers.

The impact upon individual well-being can be significant. For example, when older people are hospitalised away from the community, local friends and family may either experience considerable inconvenience in maintaining regular contact, or simply not visit. Family members, including spouses, may be unable to afford the costs of accompanying the person to hospital away from home, and staying close to them during the period of hospitalisation.

Assumption 2: Improvement to vehicles and roads means that people are able to access regional centres from smaller communities and rural areas.

Public transport is either non-existent or very limited in most small communities. A lack of public transport impacts upon older people's ability to independently access services. The limited public transport which is available in inland areas often does not allow a return journey to be made to a regional centre without an overnight stay. This results in a growing dependence on community transport for those without access to a private vehicle. However in many small communities community transport is, in turn, largely dependent upon volunteers, a shrinking and ageing resource.

Examination of public transport infrastructure in NSW identifies major gaps. The size and implications of these gaps in service provision increase as population density decreases. The problem is multi-faceted, a lack of an integrated approach to transport planning and provision in rural areas; limited demand meaning that commercial services are not viable in many areas; in NSW Countrylink rail and coach services based on a network which focuses on the Sydney area as the key destination; a lack of subsidy for commercial services to transport older people at reduced rates; and community transport services which are largely limited to the HACC target group.



Assumption 3: Communication technology can be an efficient and cost effective alternative to face to face interaction, for delivery of services to older people living outside capital cities and regional centres.

There are some groups within rural communities with below average access to a telephone in the home, or access to only a restricted service. In a study of the care needs of older Aboriginal people in the Grafton area only 63% had access to a telephone in their own home well below the Australian average of 96%. Lack of a telephone in the home compounds the difficulties associated with accessing services, particularly for people living in outlying areas, where the only public telephone may be several kilometres away.

The replacement of face to face with telephone based services presumes a skilled population in rural areas who are able to identify the right agency to contact and then frame an inquiry in a way that can be readily categorised. In a recent study by The Rural Development Centre (TRDC) for the NSW Office of Regional Communities on *Access to Government Services in rural New South Wales* identified inadequate literacy skills as a significant barrier to accessing government services. Literacy/illiteracy is a continuum of skills rather than an absolute measure.

Problems with the quality of telephone based interaction were identified by older participants in the focus groups held as part of the TRDC research including poor articulation, difficult to understand accents, a failure by staff to identify themselves and their position within the organisation. Message based and electronic 1300 and freecall systems were widely criticised, because of the complexity of use, delays in calls being answered, and difficulty often experienced in reaching the required position or person.

Increasingly there is an assumption that the internet will be able to provide 'the answer' to the information and access needs of rural people. However there are problems associated with this assumption. Current line standards do not guarantee for all rural people a standard of line sufficient to allow reliable internet access. Public access points to the internet are still available in only a minority of small communities, and pre-existing skills may be necessary to use these facilities.

Assumption 4: In small rural communities volunteer based services can replace paid government or community sector service providers.

In many small communities, particularly those in inland areas, volunteer resources are decreasing for a number of reasons. As an example many farm women, who once formed the backbone of volunteer support organisations in rural areas are now working off-farm or on-farm. Many

of those people who remain active in the community are becoming overburdened by the demands upon them, to provide a range of services, not only those to support older people. The result of the overall ageing of the population in many small communities means that the volunteers are also ageing.

Some issues for consideration

In relation to aged care policy, planning and resource allocation, research by The Rural Development Centre suggests the need for:

1. Acknowledgment of the cumulative impact of policy and practice decisions made by a range of government, business and community organisations.
2. Holistic planning in communities in decline as well as those communities which are stable or growing in population.
3. Recognition that information and communications technology cannot always effectively replace face to face services.
4. Recognition that family carers and volunteers are a shrinking resource, and cannot be assumed to be available to take a primary role in aged care in small rural communities, particularly those communities with declining populations.
5. Greater focus to be given to the needs of an ageing population in rural areas in transport planning, particularly the provision of public transport and community transport.

Concluding comments

There is no 'magic bullet' solution to policy and service provision for rural older people. It is simply not appropriate to continue with a situation where sectorial boundaries often serve to restrict or even deny older people in rural areas effective access to services. Decisions by government and business for changes in service delivery made on the basis of efficiency serve to undermine important links between people at a local level which are necessary for the maintenance of functioning "communities in place". Approaches and practices which reinforce and strengthen small rural communities are essential if older people in rural Australia are to have a real choice to 'age in place'.

Further information:

- Foskey, R. 1997. *Accommodation and Care Needs of Older Aboriginal people in Grafton and District*, Report prepared on behalf of Nunuar Elders and Cangai Corporation to Hostel and Care Branch, NSW Home Care Service.
- Foskey, R. 1998. Ageing in small rural communities. Paper presented to the Australian Institute of Family Studies Conference, Melbourne, November 1998.
- Stayner, R. and Foskey, R. 1997. *Access to Government Services in Rural New South Wales A Pilot study*. Report to the NSW Office of Rural Communities.

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